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ABSTRACT

Many different ingredients are inherent in a quality program of reading instruction. These include word attack skills training and improving comprehension. One important facet of comprehension pertains to elements in the literary selection read by students. These elements include characterization, the story's setting, the theme of the story, and the plot. Journal writing is very useful in the literature curriculum. Each student may write entries related to what has been learned about characterization, setting, theme, or plot. Students need to be engaged actively in the literature curriculum, and the teacher has the responsibility to select activities and experiences that are of interest to the learner. Other ingredients of good teaching include: (1) establishing a purpose in learning; (2) promoting motivation in learning; (3) providing for individual differences; and (4) caring for others in the classroom. (SLD)

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Assessment, Reading, and the Curriculum

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There are different ingredients that are inherent in a quality program of reading instruction. Among others, these include word attack skills and different achievement levels in comprehension. One important facet of comprehension pertains to elements in the literary selection read by students. The first to be considered is characterization.

Characterization in Reading

In a narrative reading selection, the author may devote a considerable portion to characterization. If a literary selection has related illustrations related directly to the title, students with teacher guidance may discuss what appears to be traits of the major character. Following reading of the selection, students may brainstorm what kind of person the main character in the reading selection appears to be. In fact, after the reading activity, the teacher may ask in a very open-ended question, "What kind of person do you think the main character (use the exact name) really was?" The teacher may record each concept provided on the chalkboard. There are several rules to follow here:

1. Do not repeat what has been said by others in class.
2. Respect each other's thinking.
3. Try to present each answer in one word or a phrase (the latter may need explanation).
4. Do not interrupt while someone is speaking.

Each response given is accepted as is, with no modification at this time. It becomes increasingly more difficult to present new concepts, as the numbers listed on the chalkboard increases.

After no more concepts are presented, another open-ended question may be asked of learners, "Which of these concepts on the chalkboard are very closely related and may be written as a single word?" Here, the teacher will need to demonstrate by taking two very closely related concepts and combining them into one. Students engaged in this activity will need to synthesize concepts, resulting in a higher level of cognition. The number of concepts on the chalkboard will now be reduced by approximately one-half.

By brainstorming traits of the major character in literature, students may be illuminated pertaining to the thinking of others. Generalizations may then be drawn.

In addition to brainstorming about character traits, students need challenge and quality teaching to think about the setting of the story.

Setting of Story Contents

Settings written by authors may be short in duration. Then too, the opposite may be the case whereby the author truly elaborates in detail. Each setting needs to be evaluated with related comments by students in class. A challenging learning environment should then be in the offing. There will be different interpretations of the settings, as given by the author. How might learners be actively engaged in setting interpretation?

After the contents of the character and setting have been read by students, a depth discussion should follow to bring to bear on the topic the thinking of students. This may be followed with choices made by students on one or more of the following experiences pertaining to the story setting:

1. Drawing an illustration. Students possess different intelligences and one of these may be artistic intelligence.
2. Recording what an individual or committee has agreed upon as to the story setting details.
3. Video taping a collaborative endeavor to indicate the quality of interaction of the committee members. Also, the product of the group needs to be shown pertaining to the collaboration.
4. Making a three dimensional diorama to clarify the setting.
5. Developing a mural or collage to show the setting.
6. Constructing a model revealing vital ideas.
7. Writing a different setting than the one written by the author.
8. Brainstorming interpretations of the author's setting and arriving at conclusions.
9. Dramatizing the setting of the story.
10. Writing diary entries pertaining to personal experiences involving the author's setting.

By providing for a variety of choices, the English teacher provides opportunities for students to select that which harmonizes with the individual's intelligence. Also group versus individual endeavors provide opportunities for students to use personal styles of learning.

Theme of the Story

The recurring message of the author is vital for students to understand. Thus, the theme may well be discussed in depth with learners. Different interpretations may be offered with an attempted consensus reached. Identifying and understanding a theme involves meaning theory of learning. Certainly a student needs to comprehend the theme(s). A problem solving approach may be used. Thus, students with teacher guidance may:

1. Select the problem relating to theme identification.

2. Gather information in terms of problems relating to meaning and understanding of the theme.

3. Develop a hypothesis or tentative answer to the problem. The hypothesis needs to be clearly stated and possess minimal weaknesses.

4. Additional reading and study is needed to assess the hypothesis.

5. The original hypothesis may be refuted, as needed.

Problem solving provides opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking whereby relevant ideas are separated from the irrelevant in possible answers to the identified problem area. In addition to critical thinking, creative thought also is inherent. Unique, novel ways are needed to solve problems. Thus, the "tried and true" may not work in solving a new problem.

The Plot

What happened in the story pertains to the plot. Much deliberation should go into determining the plot. Characterization, setting, theme, and plot need to be perceived as being interrelated, not as isolated entities.

Here students may become actively involved in different types of dramatic experiences. These may include:

1. Creative dramatics. Students then have adequate background information to do the creative dramatics presentation. There are no words to read, but students engage spontaneously in using background information to participate.

2. A related experience involves formal dramatics. Here students in small groups write a script to use for different characters in the formal dramatization. The parts may be memorized or read aloud by the involved person, representing a character in the plot. Readers theater may also be stressed whereby each involved character reads his/her part. A separate person reads the necessary background information which is unrelated to a direct quotation of a character in the plot. If the entire story is short in length, specific parts for each character may be read for the setting and the plot.

3. Pantomimes may also be rehearsed and presented to the entire class. In a pantomime, there are no speaking parts. Students here realize how complex it is to convey information without the use of words. Gestures, facial expressions, and body movements may be used here in non-verbal communication.

Students need to breathe life into literary selections read through dramatizations. They tend to be motivated when being involved in the actual planning and implementing of a dramatization.

Journal Writing

Journal writing is very appropriate in the literature curriculum. Each student may write entries pertaining to what was learned about characterization, setting, theme, and plot. When writing journal entries, students practice writing. Reading and writing are interrelated. Journal entries help students to review and retain what has been learned.

Students need to achieve optimally in the reading curriculum. The best of objectives, learning opportunities, and assessment procedures need to be in the offing.

In Summary

Students need to be actively engaged in the literature curriculum when studying characterization, the setting, the theme, and plot. Students also need to experience interest in ongoing learning opportunities. The chances are that students will not achieve optimally if interest is lacking. The teacher has an important responsibility to select those activities and experiences which are of great interest to learners. Other ingredients of good teaching include:

1. Purpose in learning. Each learning experience needs to have a purpose or reason. The teacher may provide reasons for student participation in a given activity. Or, learners may be guided intrinsically to understand reasons for participating in a learning opportunity.
2. Motivation in learning. A motivated student has a high energy level for learning. The use of voice inflection by the teacher assists motivation. Proper stress, pitch, and juncture together with a clear, speaking voice involving eye contact, motivates students to achieve.
3. Providing for individual differences. Each student is unique and possesses a present level or achievement which differs from that of other learners. Differences need to be respected and accepted by all in a classroom. Ridiculing of individual differences among students is negative and must be avoided. When learning opportunities are provided, students individually need to attach meaning to what is being learned.
4. Caring for others in the classroom. Teachers and students need to be caring persons. Assisting and helping each other as needed are highly worthwhile objectives. Rudeness and inconsiderateness must be eliminated as avoidable traits in the classroom. Guiding each to achieve well is an ultimate, positive goal.